

Brownfields Success Story

A Tale of Two Cities Ranson and Charles Town, West Virginia

For decades, two adjacent communities faced a formidable common foe: a 1.5-mile strip of brownfields. Vacant for decades, underused and in some cases contaminated, the properties along this stretch of land linking Ranson and Charles Town, WV, left both a physical scar in the form of dilapidated buildings and a psychological stigma that retarded redevelopment in the two cities.

How these communities overcame the challenge of cleaning up and revitalizing what came to be known as the Commerce Corridor is a story of civic leadership, cooperation and teamwork. It involves a commitment to achieving cultural, economic and environmental benefits in line with the two communities' land use plans and goals for quality of life. It began with a realization among the cities' leadership that "we can do better."

The Opportunity

Located about an hour west of Washington, DC, Ranson and Charles Town are home to a combined population of about 10,000 people. Charles Town was founded by President George Washington's youngest brother, Charles, in 1786 and is the seat of Jefferson County. Ranson sprang to life much later, in 1910, as the county's industrial hub, anchoring a booming mining and manufacturing economy for much of the 20th century.

However, by the 1990s, several major employers closed and well over 1,000 local manufacturing jobs disappeared almost overnight. More than a dozen acres of vacant properties were left along this key corridor between the cities.

Leaders from both cities recognized the need to replace jobs and rebuild the commercial tax base. In 1999 and 2000, they convened the Commerce Corridor Council. Made up of local government representatives, business and property owners, residents, state and federal officials, and other stakeholders, the council was designed to help develop a comprehensive plan for addressing and redeveloping the multiple brownfield sites and create a vision for the communities' future. The vision: To reinvent the corridor as a mixed-use, high-tech hub.

"When manufacturing left town, Ranson was left with few jobs and a number of environmentally impacted sites to deal with," says Dawn Seeburger, an environmental consultant with Environmental Resources & Consulting who has worked with the cities since they received their first assessment grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2001. "Charles Town is a beautiful historic town that attracts tourism. But Ranson was literally dying. It didn't really have a choice but to reinvent itself."



American Public University System's new academic center was among several projects constructed along the revitalized Commerce Corridor.

EPA Grant Recipients:

Cities of Ranson and Charles Town

Grants Received to Date:

EPA Brownfields

- Three Assessment Grants (Ranson)
- Area-Wide Planning Grant (Ranson)
- Cleanup Grant (Ranson)
- Revolving Loan Fund Grant (Charles Town)

Former Uses:

Metal salvage yard, warehousing, foundry and spray painting facilities

Current Uses:

American Public University System facilities, Ranson Civic Center and green space



Ranson and Charles Town officials and team accept the 2012 EPA Region 3 Phoenix Award and National People's Choice award for the Commerce Corridor project at the National Brownfields Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.



The Maytag Corporation's Dixie-Narco site, prior to repurposing as the Ranson Civic Center.

“When we started this project, no one would touch a brownfield site with a 10-foot pole. But both federal and state agencies have made it easier for landowners and developers to revitalize brownfields. As the stigma surrounding them goes away, we’re going to see more and more value in these properties as we move forward.”

*Andy Blake
City Manager
Ranson, West Virginia*

Selected Projects

Ranson Civic Center. The first step toward turning that vision into a reality occurred in 2001 when EPA awarded Ranson and Charles Town the first of three assessment grants to study the contamination at multiple brownfields. One of the first sites studied was a 1.3-acre parcel owned by Maytag Corporation's Dixie-Narco, a manufacturer of vending machine equipment. After the company moved its spray painting operation elsewhere, the 40,000-square-foot building remained idle for more than a decade.

City officials sought to repurpose the building as the Ranson Civic Center. After several years of negotiations, the city purchased the property in 2008 for \$1 and immediately began redeveloping the site. Remediation included removing potential health hazards from the interior of the building and abating asbestos in an adjacent dilapidated house prior to demolition and redevelopment as a small pocket park and playground.

Ranson invested more than \$500,000 in redeveloping the facility and the adjacent park, which were completed in 2010 and 2011. Today, the facility houses Ranson's Parks and Recreation Commission and hosts sporting events, concerts and other activities attracting residents from Ranson, Charles Town and the surrounding areas.

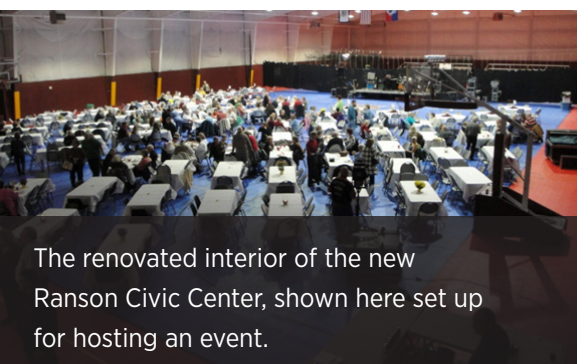
APUS Academic Center. At the heart of the Commerce Corridor revitalization is a new high-tech campus for the American Public University System (APUS), the second-largest, fully online provider of higher education in the country. The new academic center sits on the 1.8-acre site of the former Veiner Metal Salvage Yard, vacant since the 1960s.

One of the key sites targeted for redevelopment, the salvage yard was perceived to be heavily contaminated and therefore unusable, despite its strategic location on a main thoroughfare between the two cities. Ranson used \$38,000 in EPA grant money to perform environmental assessments in 2004 and 2006, which confirmed the presence of low concentrations of heavy metals and petroleum hydrocarbons that could easily be addressed during redevelopment.

During the construction phase, which began in 2009 and wrapped up in 2010, APUS's contractors excavated and removed 48 tons of soil contaminated with petroleum hydrocarbons and heavy metals, along with several underground storage tanks. Capping the rest of the site with asphalt and concrete—the building's footprint and parking lot—was determined adequate to effectively eliminate exposure and further retard migration of any remaining contaminants. With the environmental remediation completed, APUS invested \$12 million redeveloping the property as its new academic center. The building earned LEED gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, thanks in part to its energy-efficient design and 99 solar panels on the roof that provide a portion of the facility's energy.

With more than 100,000 students from all 50 states and 100 countries, APUS continues to expand and is attracting highly skilled educational and technology-based jobs to the region. The 45,000-square-foot academic center is designed to accommodate 330 employees and is currently close to capacity with staffers ranging from clerical and managerial to academic professionals.

APUS Financial Center and Solar Array. Another parcel previously owned by Maytag Corporation's Dixie-Narco found new life as APUS's new financial center and solar array parking lot. Based on the historical use of the site for warehousing and parking, minimal environmental assessments were performed. Construction of the financial center began in 2011 and was completed in 2012. The center earned LEED silver certification. The four-story, 105,000-square-foot financial center straddles the boundaries of Ranson and Charles Town and was built using \$18 million in private



The renovated interior of the new Ranson Civic Center, shown here set up for hosting an event.

funding. The environmentally friendly facility serves as office and meeting space for more than 400 finance and administrative staff. Other APUS developments on adjacent and nearby brownfield sites are being planned, and a new information technology center is currently underway.

The parking lot for the facilities features the largest solar array in West Virginia, with more than 1,600 U.S.-made solar panels affixed to a canopy structure covering the parking area. The solar array provides approximately half the energy required to run the financial center—that's enough electricity to power 30 average-sized homes. The parking lot also includes 14 charging stations that employees, visitors and residents can use to recharge their electric or hybrid vehicles.

The extensive brownfields planning process that began with the first EPA assessment grant created the opportunity for development of the corridor's centerpiece, the APUS campus. The university was looking for a location near the cities' downtown areas with room to grow. As a charter signatory of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, APUS found it a significant plus to be able to build on known brownfields. "We were lucky," Blake says, "It was the right time, and we had the right place with the right acreage."

Area-Wide Planning. Those early assessment grants and planning efforts for the Commerce Corridor also laid the groundwork for Ranson to become one of the only cities in the country to receive all three grants available through the Obama Administration's Partnership for Sustainable Communities. These include a Brownfields Area-Wide Planning grant from EPA, a Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and a Sustainable Community Challenge Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). With these grants, the cities have continued to advance local brownfields projects and planning efforts, including upgrading Fairfax Boulevard into a complete street, which will connect old and new areas of Ranson and improve stormwater management in the surrounding area.

Under the area-wide planning grant, Ranson officials worked with community residents, businesses and the city of Charles Town to continue the planning started in 2001 with the first assessment grants. Additional sites were targeted for redevelopment and include the former Kidde Foundry (a manufacturer of fire suppression equipment) and an old municipal dump in Charles Town that is part of the public works yard. Research on how best to clean up and redevelop these sites was conducted alongside the public visioning and community engagement sessions for the HUD- and DOT-funded projects. In addition to developing a plan and implementation strategy for commercial and economic development projects, the area-wide planning grant helped city leadership to evaluate opportunities to increase the use of green infrastructure to manage stormwater and help control localized flooding in downstream areas.

Redevelopment as Green Space. A key aspect of the planning and visioning process was the decision to redevelop some of the brownfield sites as green space. In Ranson, the former Kidde Foundry, a nearly 8-acre former industrial site located about three blocks from the center of downtown, is being redeveloped as green space and parkland. A \$200,000 EPA brownfield cleanup grant and \$40,000 in matching city funds were used to abate asbestos in the foundry prior to demolition and to develop remedial work plans to further address contamination in the soil from heavy metals and other pollutants after years of manufacturing operations.

As a Chesapeake Bay watershed community, Ranson also adopted a SmartCode planning, zoning and incentives system that includes a green overlay zoning district around the downtown and brownfield areas. The goal is to foster low-impact development and deployment of green infrastructure when repurposing brownfield sites and in new construction.

On the former Kidde Foundry site a large stormwater retention pond will be developed along with a stormwater conveyance system. The conveyance system will connect to green infrastructure installed as part of the Fairfax Boulevard upgrade into a "complete street"—one that is considered to be safe and appealing to all road users, including drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders. Soils excavated from the Fairfax Boulevard upgrade will be used to cap the former foundry site and elevate the grade prior to grass seeding. The city expects to complete the project by early 2016.



A former metal salvage yard now is home to APUS's academic center.



The new APUS financial center and solar array (left) are shown here from above.



Ranson used an EPA Cleanup Grant to address contaminants at the former Kidde Foundry, shown here during demolition.

In Charles Town multiple current and former industrial sites will be cleaned up and redeveloped into green space and parkland with the help of a \$650,000 revolving loan fund grant awarded by EPA in 2012, and supplemented in 2014 with an additional \$250,000. Combined with the city's 20 percent matching fund requirement, the city has \$1.08 million dedicated to remediating these current and former industrial sites. Contamination on the sites ranges from minor impacts from heavy metals and petroleum hydrocarbons to those that are more heavily polluted.

The end result will be more than 1 mile of contiguous green space and parkland that will extend from the Ranson Civic Center and APUS Campus to Charles Washington's grave site and home, known as Happy Retreat, which was built in 1780. The parkland will include numerous recreational amenities, another stormwater detention pond, bioswales and other green infrastructure. Walking trails adjacent to Evitts Run Creek will guide visitors past numerous historical sites, across old stone bridges and onto boardwalks that meander through a wooded wetland. Signage will blend historical information with highlights of the brownfield redevelopment.

The Keys to Success

The road to revitalizing the Commerce Corridor is paved with a mix of patience, persistence and luck. "In the beginning, the answer is 'No' more often than 'Yes,'" says Andy Blake, Ranson's city manager. "You need elected officials who understand the need to remain focused and persistent. We were turned down for some grants, but we kept after it with our long-term vision in mind."

Dave Mills, Charles Town's city manager, adds that "staying with a team of consultants that understood our vision and is dedicated to our projects was an incredible help in achieving our success."

Cooperation between Ranson and Charles Town throughout the process was crucial. "The cities adopted a mantra of 'Two Cities, One Revitalization Plan,'" Seeburger says. "The revitalization was not about one city—it was about the entire community at large. Every time you assess and clean up a site to ready it for redevelopment, you not only remove the environmental stigma, but you also remove a vacant or dilapidated building that was an eyesore people had to drive by every day. Brownfields can be dangerous places that attract area youth and the homeless, and this can result in injury or death. This work ultimately improves overall public health and provides hope for a better future for residents who live, work and play in the area."

The two cities are now well on their way toward meeting their revitalization goals of creating a high-tech hub and new jobs. Since Ranson and Charles Town got the ball rolling with the first EPA brownfield assessment grant, APUS invested nearly \$50 million in the Commerce Corridor and the cities' downtown areas. Approximately 560 APUS employees work locally in the academic and financial centers or at the other 18 renovated buildings in downtown Charles Town within the revitalization area.

"All this," Blake says, "was spurred by public investment. Brownfields are a tool in the toolbox, a means to an end. Reuse of resources and creation of employment opportunities are the ultimate goal. Brownfields revitalization is the process, but the end game is economic development."

Although these two small cities accomplished much in a little over a decade, their leadership and team of consultants are still hard at work making these communities a place where you truly want to live, work and play. After being awarded the 2012 EPA Region 3 Phoenix Award, the 2012 National People's Choice Award and the 2014 Brownfields Renewal Award for the Commerce Corridor Project, you might say Ranson and Charles Town have become the poster children for brownfield redevelopment in rural communities!



Charles Town's grant from EPA's Revolving Loan Fund is helping finance redevelopment of the Supertane site as parkland. This historic bridge crosses Evitts Run Creek adjacent to the site.

“To be successful, you need to maintain your core principles, but don't be so rigid that you stall everything if something changes. That vision you drew 10 years ago might need to be different now, as circumstances change.”

*Andy Blake
City Manager
Ranson, West Virginia*

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at epa.gov/brownfields or contact Stephanie Branche at (215) 814-5556 or Branche.Stephania@epa.gov (cleanup grant), Humberto Monsalvo at (215) 814-2163 or Monsalvo.Humberto@epa.gov (revolving loan fund grant) or Aimee Storm at (202) 566-0633 or Storm.Aimee@epa.gov (area-wide planning grant).